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# FEATURING COMICS OF PLACE: HOW THE CITY OF STOCKHOLM PLAYS A ROLE IN SWEDISH COMICS

by Frank Bramlett





‘Stockholm i seriernas värld’ / ‘Stockholm in the World of Comics’

Exhibition at Stockholms Stadsmuseum (Stockholm City Museum)<sup>1</sup>

25 January to 5 May 2013

I had the good fortune to visit ‘Stockholm i seriernas värld’ / ‘Stockholm in the World of Comics’ in May 2013, around the time of Free Comic Book Day. Held at the Stockholm City Museum, just two metro stops from the city center, it was meant to highlight the role that the city of Stockholm plays in comics, particularly Swedish comics. In total, twenty-one comics artists/writers were featured.

The exhibit was organized by Anna Seidevall-Byström, project leader and curator, and by Susanne Deist, a graphic designer and exhibit designer. The two women put together a remarkably educational and aesthetically beautiful multimedia event. Plaques on the walls provided brief bios for many of the artists, in both Swedish and English. They also provided some commentary about the featured comic strips and panels. The images on the walls and in display cases ranged from full-length comic strips, to pages from graphic novels, to single panels.

The space allocated for the show was not generous; according to Hans Öjmyr, the site manager for the City Museum, the exhibit was given approximately 70 square meters. However, Seidevall-Byström and Deist made the most of what they had to work with. They were able to incorporate a large number and a rich variety of images on the walls, in addition to the print materials in display cases.

Impressively, the space did not feel crowded or overwhelming; it was both intimate and comfortable, and made for a very pleasant experience.

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<sup>1</sup> About Stockholms stadsmuseum: The museum is located near the City Center, near the Slussen metro station. To see the Museum’s Swedish-language web page, visit <http://www.stadsmuseet.stockholm.se/>. The Museum’s home page does have an English version, but not all Swedish pages are translated, and some English-language pages are shorter versions of the Swedish-language pages. There is not yet an English-language page about the comics exhibit.

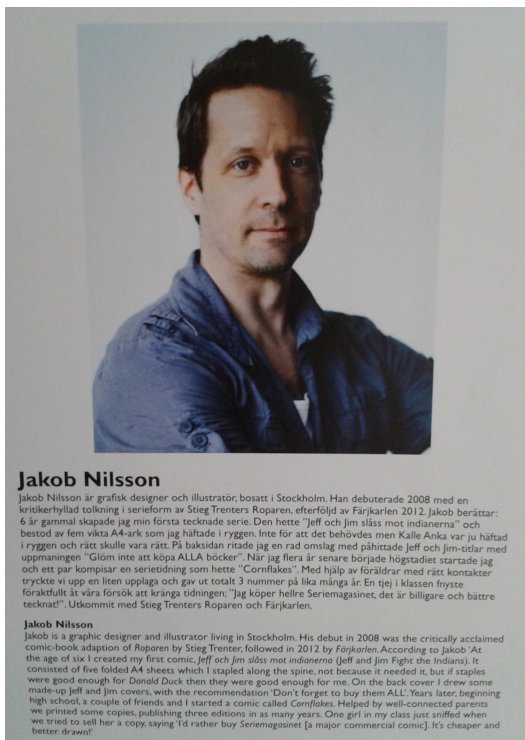


Figure 1. Jakob Nilsson.



Figure 2. Lena Ackebo.

As demonstrated in Figures 1 and 2, many of the images were accompanied by text to supply context for the viewer. Most of the Swedish-language texts of the exhibit were also translated into English.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE EXHIBIT

Rather than ordering the artifacts by creator or by title, the museum chose to organize the exhibition by themes:

- *Stockholmaren (The Stockholmer)*
- *Hemmet, familjen och grannarna (Home, Family, and Neighbors)*
- *Krogen (The tavern)*
- *Fantasi och action (Fantasy and Action)*
- *Tunnelbanan (Metro, Underground, Subway)*
- *Serien som tidsmaskin (Comics as a Time Machine)*



For example, for ‘Comics as a Time Machine,’ the images ranged across different decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The placard for this theme cites ‘a Stockholm that no longer exists,’ when the neighborhood near Stockholm Cathedral consisted mostly of old houses rather than the modern urbanscape that exists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



Figure 3. The Stockholmer.

Caption: ‘The Stockholmer.’ Many comics portray the city’s inhabitants with love and humor. What, then, is special about the citizens of the capital? Maybe the Stockholmer has many different cultures, styles, and rules to relate to. Many of today’s comics creators continue a documenting tradition through drawn commentary in newspapers, dating from the 1880s.

In a telephone interview with Seidevall-Byström, I asked whether there were any themes that were considered for the show but were left out. She explained that





they considered including the theme of sexuality, but for a number of reasons decided not to include it. She cited the wide-ranging articulation of sexuality in the comics, making it difficult to present the theme coherently. She also mentioned that the exhibit space for the show was located near the museum's children's area, and the organizers hesitated because of the potential difficulty presented by this proximity. But Seidevall-Byström specified that, even though this was a contributing factor, it played only a small role in leaving the theme of sexuality out of the show.

## DISPLAYED IMAGES

Several images were enlarged and put directly on the walls of the museum, ranging from full comic strips to excerpts from comic books. These enlargements were beautifully designed, arranged on the walls in highly readable fashion.



Figure 4. Three female characters from Lena Ackebo's *FUCKING SOFO*.



The image of three female characters, taken from Ackebo's *FUCKING SOFO* (Figure 4), was enlarged to a width of more than a meter, taking up a significant amount of space on the wall.

	Swedish	English
Amy	Men gud hallå! Vart är ni på väg?	God! Hello! Where are you going?
Elina	Vi vet inte...	We don't know...
Amy	Får man hänga me?	Can I tag along?
Debbie	Vart då?	Where to?
Amy	Inte vet jag...	I don't know...

Figure 4 shows characters from the area of Stockholm known as Södermalm, an island just south of the city-center (Ackebo 2010, p. 48). SOFO is a phrase, analogous to SOHO, a tony neighborhood in London, serving as a place name but also standing in for Ackebo's take on the residents' attitudes, fashion, relationships, and other concerns of everyday life, including their style of language.

## INTERVIEWS WITH ARTISTS

One very productive and successful element of this exhibition was the collection of interviews with the artists. These interviews were edited into a video montage and shown on a video monitor (see Figure 5 below). Several creators were interviewed, including Arja Kajermo, who was born in Finland but lived in Sweden for twenty years before moving to Ireland. Her comic strip 'Tuula' has appeared in *Dagens Nyheter*, one of Sweden's newspapers (tuula.se). Another interviewee was Jakob Nilsson, who is a graphic designer and illustrator living in Stockholm. One of his best known works is a graphic interpretation of *Roparen*, a novel by Swedish writer Stieg Trenters (kartago.se).

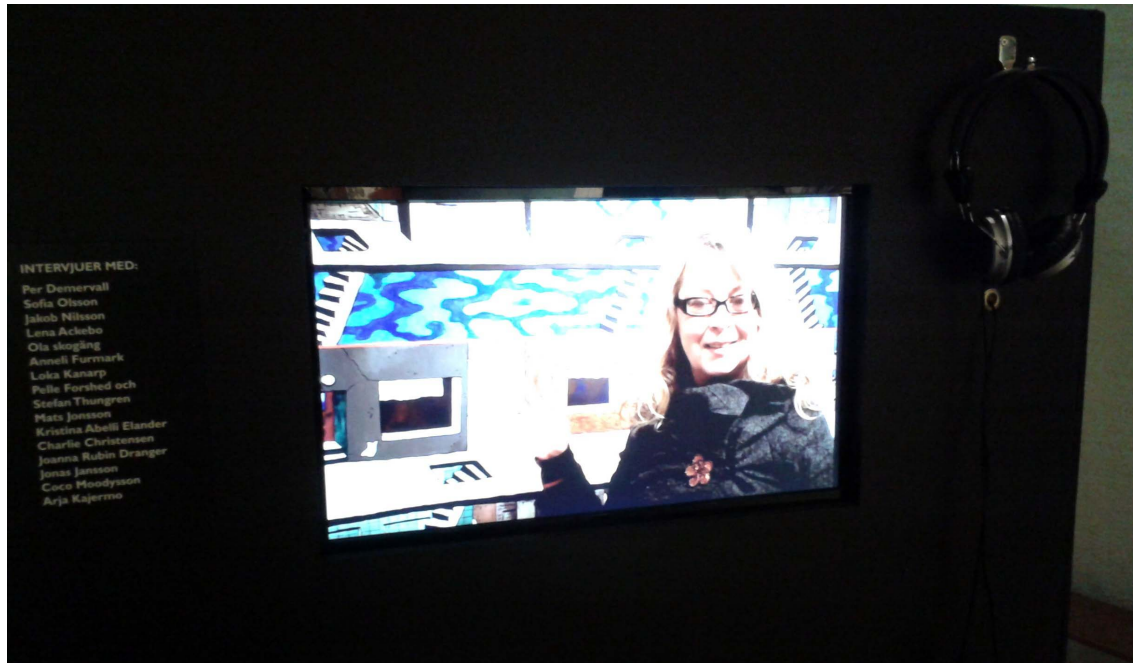


Figure 5. Kristina Abelli Elander.

Note the headphones hanging beside the video screen (Figure 5). This allowed individuals to listen to the interviews while also keeping the exhibit space quiet for other visitors.

## THE FUTURE OF THE EXHIBIT

In my telephone interview with Anna Seidevall-Byström, I asked about the future of the exhibit, what would become of all those wonderful artifacts. She said that the show was temporary, that it would not become part of the Stadsmuseum's permanent collection. But she explained that there were discussions taking place about showing the exhibit in other spaces in Stockholm. In a follow-up interview, Hans Öjmyr confirmed that the Museum has decided to create a smaller, more portable version of the exhibit so that it can be shown in different parts of the city, particularly the outlying suburbs. He cited the Museum's focus on cultural education as a primary reason for this outreach effort. Öjmyr also said that



because comics are read by adults more than by children, the traveling exhibit will be directed at an older reading audience.

I also asked whether more of the Swedish-language text would be translated into English for the benefit of international visitors and comics scholars around the world. Seidevall-Byström assured me that she wanted to do this, but added that they were working on contractual issues, especially regarding the interviews with the artists. She also speculated that the video of the artist interviews could appear on-line, but she does not know when or if that will happen. As of May 2016, the videos have not been uploaded yet. In fact, the Stadsmuseum building is closed for renovation, with a planned re-opening in 2018.

Öjmyr emphasized that the staff at the City Museum was enthusiastic about developing this exhibit. He said that they had discussed the possibility of hosting it for several years, and worked hard to make it a success. As curator for the exhibit, Seidevall-Byström emphasized how delighted she was to be able to produce it. In her opinion, the comics scene in Stockholm has grown and improved rather markedly in the last decade, and she wanted to show this growth with the comics exhibit. She also expressed her gratitude to the artists because several of them donated or loaned materials for the show and some volunteered their time.

## CONCLUSION

The exhibit was remarkably successful in that it clearly and engagingly summarized a variety of comics produced in the milieu of late twentieth and early twenty-first century Stockholm. Further, the exhibit featured established, well-known artists as well as artists who are relatively new to the comics scene. While the show could have explored its themes more critically, it did treat the artists' work with respect. Further, the exhibited images (those large panels excerpted from the comics) were coupled with supporting text and interviews to





demonstrate that the city of Stockholm plays an important role in the hearts and minds of comics artists and comics readers alike.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Photo Credits: All photos by Frank Bramlett, who freely admits his amateur status.

## REFERENCES

Ackebo, Lena. 2010. *FUCKING SOFO*. Sundbyberg, Sweden: Kartago Förlag.

Jakob Nilsson. Kartago. <http://www.kartago.se/forfattare/jakob-nilsson/>

Tuula. <http://www.tuula.se/arja.php>.